

## Unit 1:

### a) Classical Criticism: Critical Essays

#### 1. Aristotle: Poetics (Chapters 1 to 15)

Aristotle's "Poetics" is a seminal work of literary criticism that explores the nature and structure of poetry and drama. Written in the 4th century BCE, it remains one of the most influential texts in the history of Western literary theory. Here is a detailed note on key aspects of Aristotle's "Poetics":

#### Background:

- Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, was a student of Plato and a teacher of Alexander the Great.
- "Poetics" is believed to be part of Aristotle's lectures at the Lyceum and is considered one of his major works.
- The treatise primarily focuses on tragedy, but Aristotle also touches upon epic poetry and other forms of literature.

#### Structure of Tragedy:

##### 1. Plot (Mythos):

- Aristotle places the plot as the most crucial element of a tragedy.
- The plot should have a beginning, middle, and end, with a unity of action.
- Unity of time, place, and action is emphasized for a well-constructed plot.

##### 2. Character (Ethos):

- Characters should be consistent and appropriate to the plot.
- Aristotle introduces the concept of the tragic hero, a character of noble stature with a flaw (hamartia) that leads to their downfall.

##### 3. Thought (Dianoia):

- Refers to the theme, ideas, and moral aspects of the work.
- A tragedy should evoke a sense of fear and pity (catharsis) in the audience, purging them of these emotions.

##### 4. Diction (Lexis):

- The choice of words is important. It should be appropriate for the characters and the situation.
- Aristotle discusses the difference between poetic language and ordinary language.

##### 5. Melody (Melos) and Spectacle (Opsis):

- Aristotle acknowledges the importance of music and spectacle in tragedy but considers them secondary to the plot and character.
- The spectacle should not overshadow the other elements.

#### Unities:

##### • Unity of Action:

- The plot should have a single central theme with no subplots to maintain focus.

##### • Unity of Time:

- The events in the plot should occur within a compressed timeframe.

##### • Unity of Place:

- The action should unfold in a single location.

#### Critique of Earlier Theories:



- Aristotle criticizes his predecessor Plato, who believed that poetry should be banned from the ideal state, as it was an imitation of reality.

### **Catharsis:**

- Aristotle introduces the concept of catharsis, suggesting that tragedy provides a purgation of emotions, specifically fear and pity.
- The audience should experience a release of these emotions, leading to a sense of emotional balance and intellectual enlightenment.

### **Influence:**

- "Poetics" has had a profound impact on Western literary criticism, shaping discussions on drama, poetry, and storytelling.
- Many later theorists and playwrights, such as Shakespeare, followed or reacted against Aristotle's ideas.

Aristotle's "Poetics" remains a fundamental text for understanding the principles of dramatic and literary art, and its ideas continue to be relevant and influential in the study of literature and theatre.

## **Chapters 1–3**

### **Summary**

Aristotle proposes to approach poetry from a scientific viewpoint, examining the constituent parts of poetry and drawing conclusions from those observations. First, he lists the different kinds of poetry: epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing. Next, he remarks that all of these kinds of poetry are mimetic, or imitative, but that there are significant differences between them.

The first kind of distinction is the means they employ. Just as a painter employs paint and a sculptor employs stone, the poet employs language, rhythm, and harmony, either singly or in combinations. For instance, flute-playing and lyre-playing employ rhythm and harmony, while dance employs only rhythm. He also addresses the question of non-poetic language, arguing that poetry is essentially mimetic, whether it is in verse or in prose. Thus, Homer is a poet, while Empedocles, a philosopher who wrote in verse, is not. While Empedocles writes in verse, his writing is not mimetic, and so it is not poetry. In tragedy, comedy, and other kinds of poetry, rhythm, language, and harmony are all used. In some cases, as in lyric poetry, all three are used together, while in other cases, as in comedy or tragedy, the different parts come in to play at different times.

The second distinction is the objects that are imitated. All poetry represents actions with agents who are either better than us, worse than us, or quite like us. For instance, tragedy and epic poetry deal with characters who are better than us, while comedy and parody deal with characters who are worse than us.

The final distinction is with the manner of representation: the poet either speaks directly in narrative or assumes the characters of people in the narrative and speaks through them. For instance, many poets tell straight narratives while Homer alternates between narrative and accounts of speeches given by



characters in his narrative. In tragedy and comedy, the poet speaks exclusively through assumed characters.

### **Analysis**

The very first paragraph of the *Poetics* gives us a hint as to how we should approach the work: it is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, Aristotle is not so much interested in arguing that poetry or tragedy should be one thing or another. Rather, he wants to look at past examples of poetry—tragedy in particular—and by dissecting them and examining their constituent parts to arrive at some general sense of what poetry is and how it works.

This is the same scientific method that Aristotle employs so successfully in examining natural phenomena: careful observation followed by tentative theories to explain the observations. The immediate and pressing question, then, is whether Aristotle is right in applying his scientific method to poetry. Physical phenomena are subject to unchanging, natural laws, and presumably a careful study of the phenomena matched with a little insight might uncover what these natural laws are. Aristotle seems to be proceeding with the assumption that the same is true for poetry: its growth and development has been guided by unchanging, natural laws, and the *Poetics* seeks to uncover these laws.

The results are mixed. In some cases, what Aristotle says seems quite right, while in others his conclusions seem very limiting. We will examine this question further when Aristotle delves deeper into the elements of tragedy.

Before going any further, we might do well to clarify some terms. When Aristotle talks about "art" or "poetry" he is not talking about what we might understand by these words. "Art" is the translation of the Greek word *techne* and is closely related to "artifice" and "artificial." Art for Aristotle is anything that is made by human beings as opposed to being found in nature. Thus, poetry, painting, and sculpture count as "art," but so do chairs, horseshoes, and sandals.

Our conception of "art" is more closely (but not exactly) approximated by what Aristotle calls "mimetic art." The Greek word *mimesis* defies exact translation, though "imitation" works quite well in the context of the *Poetics*. A chair is something you can sit in, but a painting of a chair is merely an imitation, or representation, of a real chair.

Paintings use paint to imitate real life, and sculptures use stone. Poetry is distinguished as the mimetic art that uses language, rhythm, and harmony to imitate real life, language obviously being the most crucial component.

This raises the question of in what way poetry imitates, or "mimics," real life. The events in *Oedipus Rex* did not actually happen in real life. In fact, it is important that tragedy be fictional and that there be an understanding that the events taking place on stage are not real: no one should call the police when Hamlet kills Polonius. Still, tragedy deals with humans who speak and act in a way that real humans conceivably could have spoken and acted. It is important that there be an understanding that the account is fictional, but it must also be close enough to reality that it is plausible.

There are significant differences between the kind of poetry discussed here and our conception of poetry. In modern times, the definition of poetry is



closely linked to its being written in verse. Aristotle directly contradicts that definition, pointing out that Empedocles' philosophical verses are not poetry; they present ideas rather than imitate life.

Further, narrative is essential to Aristotle's definition of poetry. Not only comedy and tragedy, but also the epic poetry of the Greeks tells stories, as we find in the Iliad and the Odyssey. Both drama and epic poetry are fictional accounts that imitate real life in some way. On the other hand, a great deal of poetry in the modern world does not imitate life in any obvious way. For instance, the Robert Burns line, "My love is like a red, red rose" may be said to "imitate" or represent the poet's love for a woman, but by that token, Empedocles' verses might be said to "imitate" or represent certain philosophical concepts.

Aristotle is not trying to condemn Robert Burns for writing love poems; he is simply trying to catalog the different kinds of poetry that existed in his time. They all employ language, rhythm, and harmony in some way or another, they all deal with people who are engaging in certain kinds of action, and they all involve some sort of direct or indirect narrative. Whether something is an epic poem, a comedy, or a tragedy depends on how it fits within these categories. For instance, a tragedy is a composite of language, rhythm, and harmony that deals with agents who are on the whole better than us, and the poet speaks directly through these agents.

## Chapters 4–5

### **Summary**

Aristotle suggests that it is human nature to write and appreciate poetry. We are by nature imitative creatures that learn and excel by imitating others, and we naturally take delight in works of imitation. As evidence of the claim that we delight in imitation, he points out that we are fascinated by representations of dead bodies or disgusting animals even though the things themselves would repel us. Aristotle suggests that we can also learn by examining representations and imitations of things and that learning is one of the greatest pleasures there is. Rhythm and harmony also come naturally to us, so that poetry gradually evolved out of our improvisations with these media.

As poetry evolved, a sharp division developed between serious writers who would write about noble characters in lofty hymns and panegyrics, and meaner writers who would write about ignoble characters in demeaning invectives. Tragedy and comedy are later developments that are the grandest representation of their respective traditions: tragedy of the lofty tradition and comedy of the mean tradition.

Aristotle stops short of saying that tragedy has achieved its complete and finished form. He lists four innovations in the development from improvised dithyrambs toward the tragedies of his day. Dithyrambs were sung in honor of Dionysus, god of wine, by a chorus of around fifty men and boys, often accompanied by a narrator. Aeschylus is responsible for the first innovation,



reducing the number of the chorus and introducing a second actor on stage, which made dialogue the central focus of the poem. Second, Sophocles added a third actor and also introduced background scenery. Third, tragedy developed an air of seriousness, and the meter changed from a trochaic rhythm, which is more suitable for dancing, to an iambic rhythm, which is closer to the natural rhythms of conversational speech. Fourth, tragedy developed a plurality of episodes, or acts.

Next, Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that comedy deals with people worse than us ourselves, saying that comedy deals with the ridiculous. He defines the ridiculous as a kind of ugliness that does no harm to anybody else. Aristotle is able only to give a very sketchy account of the origins of comedy, because it was not generally treated with the same respect as tragedy and so there are fewer records of the innovations that led to its present form.

While both tragedy and epic poetry deal with lofty subjects in a grand style of verse, Aristotle notes three significant differences between the two genres. First, tragedy is told in a dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and employs several different kinds of verse while epic poetry employs only one. Second, the action of a tragedy is usually confined to a single day, and so the tragedy itself is usually much shorter than an epic poem. Third, while tragedy has all the elements that are characteristic of epic poetry, it also has some additional elements that are unique to it alone.

### **Analysis**

Aristotle further elaborates on the value of the mimetic arts with his assertion that we are naturally imitative creatures who delight in imitation. Aristotle relates this claim to our ability to learn and reason: we exercise our reason when seeing something as an imitation of something else. It takes a certain level of recognition to see a bunch of men dancing and singing in masks as imitations of characters from ancient myths, to see stylized gestures as imitations of real action, or to see the emotional intensity generated both by actors and audience as an imitation of the emotional intensity that would have been felt if the action on stage were transpiring in real life. Aristotle defines humans as rational animals, suggesting that our rationality is what distinguishes us from other creatures. If the ability to recognize an imitation and understand what it is meant to represent requires reasoning, then we are delighting in that very faculty that makes us human.

Aristotle's account of the origin of tragedy seems on the whole quite sound. The sparseness of archaeological and other evidence has long frustrated scholars, but it seems that Aristotle's suggestion that tragedy evolved from the dithyramb is as good as any we have. Dionysus is the Greek god of vegetation and wine, and the dithyrambs in honor of him are thought to have been part of festivals celebrating the harvest and the changing of the seasons. These songs were thus part of religious ceremonies, and the speaker that accompanied the large chorus was probably a priest of some sort. Though initially improvised,



these dithyrambs developed a more rigid structure, and the speaker often engaged in dialogue with the chorus. Aeschylus is generally credited with the innovation of adding a second actor, which transformed choral singing into dialogue, ritual into drama. In short, Aeschylus invented tragedy and is the first great playwright of the Western tradition.

Near the end of Chapter 5, Aristotle mentions that one of the differences between tragedy and epic poetry is that the action of a tragedy usually unfolds in the space of a single day. This is often interpreted as one of the three "unities" of tragic drama. In fact, the three unities—unity of action (one single plot with no loose threads), unity of time (action takes place within a single day), and unity of place (action takes place in a single location)—were not invented by Aristotle at all. The Italian theorist Lodovico Castelvetro formalized these unities in 1570. This formalization was inspired by the *Poetics*, but it is far more restrictive than anything Aristotle says. The only unity he insists upon, as we shall see, is the unity of action. His reference here to the unity of time seems to be a general guideline and not one that must be followed strictly, and there is even less evidence to suggest that Aristotle demanded unity of place. The fact is, Aristotle's formulas were all drawn from Greek tragedy, and these tragedies frequently violated the unities of time and place.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary**

Aristotle now narrows his focus to examine tragedy exclusively. In order to do so, he provides a definition of tragedy that we can break up into seven parts: (1) it involves mimesis; (2) it is serious; (3) the action is complete and with magnitude; (4) it is made up of language with the "pleasurable accessories" of rhythm and harmony; (5) these "pleasurable accessories" are not used uniformly throughout, but are introduced in separate parts of the work, so that, for instance, some bits are spoken in verse and other bits are sung; (6) it is performed rather than narrated; and (7) it arouses the emotions of pity and fear and accomplishes a *katharsis* (purification or purgation) of these emotions.

Next, Aristotle asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six component parts, and that every tragedy is made up of these six parts with nothing else besides. There is (a) the spectacle, which is the overall visual appearance of the stage and the actors. The means of imitation (language, rhythm, and harmony) can be divided into (b) melody, and (c) diction, which has to do with the composition of the verses. The agents of the action can be understood in terms of (d) character and (e) thought. Thought seems to denote the intellectual qualities of an agent while character seems to denote the moral qualities of an agent. Finally, there is (f) the plot, or *mythos*, which is the combination of incidents and actions in the story.



Aristotle argues that, among these six, the plot is the most important. The characters serve to advance the action of the story, not vice versa. The ends we pursue in life, our happiness and our misery, all take the form of action. That is, according to Aristotle, happiness consists in a certain kind of activity rather than in a certain quality of character. Diction and thought are also less significant than plot: a series of well-written speeches have nothing like the force of a well-structured tragedy. Further, Aristotle suggests, the most powerful elements in a tragedy, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis*, are elements of the plot. Lastly, Aristotle notes that forming a solid plot is far more difficult than creating good characters or diction.

Having asserted that the plot is the most important of the six parts of tragedy, he ranks the remainder as follows, from most important to least: character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Character reveals the individual motivations of the characters in the play, what they want or don't want, and how they react to certain situations, and this is more important to Aristotle than thought, which deals on a more universal level with reasoning and general truths. Melody and spectacle are simply pleasurable accessories, but melody is more important to the tragedy than spectacle: a pretty spectacle can be arranged without a play, and usually matters of set and costume aren't the occupation of the poet anyway.

### **Analysis**

Aristotle's definition of tragedy at the beginning of this chapter is supposed to summarize what he has already said, but it is the first mention of the *katharsis*. The Greek word *katharsis* was usually used either by doctors to talk about purgation, the flushing of contaminants out of the system, or by priests to talk about religious purification. In either case, it seems to refer to a therapeutic process whereby the body or mind expels contaminants and becomes clean and healthy. Determining exactly what role *katharsis* is meant to play in tragedy is somewhat more difficult.

First, we might ask what exactly *katharsis* is in reference to tragedy. The idea, it seems, is that watching a tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in us and then purges these emotions. But, by virtue of *mimesis*, we aren't feeling real pity or real fear. I may feel pity for Oedipus when he learns that he has killed his father and married his mother, but this is a different kind of pity than the pity I feel for the homeless or for those living in war zones. I know that Oedipus is not a real person and that no one is really suffering when I watch Oedipus suffer. As a result, I can empathize with the character of Oedipus without feeling any kind of guilt or obligation to help him out. Watching tragedy has a cathartic effect because I can let go of the emotional tension built up in me as I leave the theater. I am able to experience profound emotion without having its consequences stay with me and harden me to subsequent emotional shocks.



Second, we might ask to what extent katharsis is the purpose of tragedy, and to what extent it is an occasional effect of tragedy. The question of in what way art may be good for us is a very difficult question to answer. The best art (and this applies to Greek tragedy) is not didactic: it does not try to tell us outright how we ought or ought not to behave. At the same time, there is definitely a lot we can learn from a subtle appreciation of art. The value of art, on the whole, seems to stem more from its ability to arouse emotion and awareness on an abstract, general level, rather than to teach us particular truths. Oedipus Rex is valuable because it engenders a certain state of mind, not because it teaches us to avoid marrying older women whose family histories are uncertain.

Though katharsis may be an important effect of tragedy, it is hardly the reason for which poets write tragedies. If that were so, poets would be little more than emotional therapists. Again, Aristotle is writing as an observer more than as a theorist. He has observed that tragedy has a cathartic effect on its viewers, but he is not trying to enunciate this as the end goal of all tragedy.

The other important concept we encounter in this chapter is that of *mythos*. While "plot" is a pretty good translation of this word in reference to tragedy, *mythos* can be applied to sculpture, music, or any other art form. The *mythos* of a piece of art is the way it is structured and organized in order to make a coherent statement. Thus, when Aristotle speaks about the "plot" of a tragedy, he is not just referring to who did what to whom, but is speaking about how the events in the story come together to bring out deeper, general themes.

Plot, then, is central to a tragedy, because that is where, if at all, its value lies. If character were central to tragedy, we would be watching Oedipus Rex in order to learn something about Oedipus, about what makes him tick, or how he reacts in different situations. The character of Oedipus in itself is uninteresting: why should we care about the personality of someone who never existed? The value of Oedipus lies in what we can learn about ourselves and our world from observing his fate. What we learn from a tragedy—the effect it has on us—results from the way it is structured to draw our minds toward general truths and ideas; that is, from its *mythos*.

## **Chapters 7–9**

### **Summary**

Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that the action of a tragedy is complete in itself and with magnitude. For a plot to be a complete whole, it must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is a point that does not necessarily follow from anything else, which naturally has consequences following from it. The end is a point that naturally follows from



preceding events but does not have any necessary consequences following it. The middle is a point that is naturally connected both to events before and after it.

The magnitude of a story is important, as it is in any art. Paintings are neither infinitesimally small nor monstrously big because they must be of such a size as to be taken in by the eye. Similarly, a tragedy must be of a moderate length so as to be taken in by the memory. Usually, time limits are set by the audience or other outside factors, but Aristotle suggests that the longer the play the greater the magnitude, provided the poet can hold the tragedy together as one coherent statement. As a general rule of thumb, he suggests the action should be long enough to allow the main character to pass through a number of necessary or probable steps that take him from fortune to misfortune or vice versa.

In insisting upon the unity of plot, Aristotle makes it clear that he does not mean that it is enough to focus the plot on the life of one individual. Our lives consist of all sorts of disconnected episodes, and the story of a man's life would rarely have the completeness necessary for a unified plot. Rather, the poet must select some series of events from a character's life—as Homer does in the *Odyssey*—and craft them into a coherent whole. Any part of a story that could be added or removed without any great effect on the rest of the story is superfluous and takes away from the unity of the piece.

Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history, saying that while history deals with what has been, poetry deals with what might be: it presents the possible as probable or necessary. Poetry is superior to history because history always deals with particular cases while poetry can express universal and general truths. Tragedy gives a feeling of necessity—or at least probability—to the way certain characters behave in certain situations and thus gives us insight into general principles regarding fate, choice, and so on. The worst kind of plot is the episodic plot, where there is no seeming necessity or probability whatsoever between events.

As a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal is to have the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

### **Analysis**

Essentially, a good plot is a complete causal chain that leads, with necessity or probability, from beginning to end. The beginning is the first link in a chain that is itself not necessarily caused by any events that precede it. The events that follow are necessary or probable consequences of this un-caused beginning.



Each event follows the next until we arrive at the end, which is also a necessary or probable consequence of all the events that have preceded it. This end does not itself cause any further events with any kind of necessity or probability and so concludes the causal chain.

What kinds of plot does this definition exclude? Aristotle explicitly condemns the episodic plot, where one event follows another without any clear connection. Obviously, no plot is entirely episodic, though we could also say that very few plots are so tightly organized as to tie in every moment with seeming inevitability. The plot with a fully integrated beginning, middle, and end is an ideal to be approximated rather than an easily attainable goal.

That the plot of a tragedy should consist of one uninterrupted causal chain with no superfluous elements (nothing that is not a necessary part of this chain) is the essence of what Aristotle means when he talks about the unity of plot or action.

Again, we should be clear that the Greek mythos is not quite the same as the English "plot": we are not so much talking about the sum total of the events in the story so much as the way they are held together to form a coherent statement. If we were thinking simply in terms of the events taking place on stage, it would be obvious that a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and end. In talking about a beginning, however, Aristotle is not talking about the first things that happen on stage so much as the first link in a causal chain that leads logically to the conclusion.

We might come to a clearer understanding of the unity of plot if we examine Aristotle's contrast between tragedy and history. Aristotle seems to hold the point of view that history is one thing after another. Event follows event, and there does not always seem to be a connection between them. This view is contestable, to say the least: the job of the historian, to a large extent, is to uncover some sort of connection between events. Aristotle says that history only deals with isolated, particular events, but a good historian can read more general truths into these events, just as a good tragedian can draw general truths out of the stories of particular characters.

Perhaps we would do better to understand Aristotle's distinction as being between fact and fiction. We tell stories to help make sense of a world that at times may seem frighteningly meaningless. There are no beginnings or ends in real life, and the stuff in between is nowhere near as neatly organized as it is in tragedy. The role of the tragedian is to take a certain series of events and to trace a logical sequence between them. The tragic action then shows us that there is some order, some necessity, in the world around us. We learn that certain kinds of behavior, certain choices, lead to certain consequences. Tragedy



draws patterns out of a meaningless swirl of experience. The end of the tragedy gives meaning to all that preceded it, as if to say, "these sorts of situations, these sorts of characters, these sorts of decisions, tend to result in this kind of a conclusion."

This causal chain need not be evident; in fact, Aristotle suggests that it is more interesting if it isn't. The best plots have unexpected outcomes, but this does not mean that they take place outside the realm of causality. Rather, unexpected twists make us aware of how poor we are at following the momentum of necessity. To take a modern example, the surprise ending to the movie *The Usual Suspects* does not make us feel cheated, as if something illogical took place. Rather, it makes us realize how poorly we had understood all the action that had preceded us: it makes us think of the whole movie in a new light.

Aristotle explicitly mentions pity and fear in reference to the logical sequencing and unexpected outcome of tragedy. We see that our character and actions determine our fate with chilling justice and efficiency, but that we are mostly ignorant of the causes of this fate and can never see it coming. We don't need to suffer Oedipus's fate to recognize our own ignorance and vulnerability in the character of Oedipus.

## **Chapters 10–12**

### **Summary**

Aristotle introduces the concepts of peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (discovery or recognition) in his discussion of simple and complex plots. All plots lead from beginning to end in a probable or necessary sequence of events, but a simple plot does so without peripeteia or anagnorisis while a complex plot may have one or both of these elements. The peripeteia or anagnorisis of a complex plot should themselves be necessary or probable consequences of what came before so that they are a part of the plot and not unnecessary add-ons.

Peripeteia is the reversal from one state of affairs to its opposite. Some element in the plot effects a reversal, so that the hero who thought he was in good shape suddenly finds that all is lost, or vice versa.

Anagnorisis is a change from ignorance to knowledge. This discovery will bring love and happiness to characters who learn of good fortune, and hatred and misery to those who discover unhappy truths. The best kind of anagnorisis accompanies peripeteia. That is, a reversal of fortune effects a discovery or vice versa. For instance, Oedipus' discovery of who his mother is effects a reversal of fortune from proud king to horrible disgrace. Aristotle suggests that anagnorisis is possible by a number of other means as well, but it is most



intimately connected to the plot when it accompanies peripeteia. The two together will help to arouse pity and fear and will also help to draw the play to its conclusion.

In addition to peripeteia and anagnorisis, Aristotle defines a third part of the plot—suffering—as actions of destructive or painful nature, such as murders, torture, and woundings.

In Chapter 12, Aristotle discusses the quantitative elements of tragedy—the different parts of the performance. These are the Prologue, Episode, Exode, and a choral portion consisting of Parode and Stasimon. In addition, some tragedies have songs from the stage and a Commos, a lamentation sung by both actor and chorus. The Parode is the first full statement of the chorus; everything that precedes it is Prologue. The Stasimon is a choral song in a certain meter, while action that takes place between choral songs is Episode. Everything that follows the last choral song is Exode.

### **Analysis**

Peripeteia and anagnorisis are fancy Greek words, but we are all quite familiar with the concepts. Anyone who has watched the eighties television show *The A-Team* is quite familiar with peripeteia. Every episode, the A-Team thinks they have the bad guys stumped, but then the tables are turned (the first peripeteia), and the team is captured. Of course, the bad guys always lock them up in a warehouse full of welding equipment, and the A-Team builds a big machine, breaks out, and busts the bad guys (the second peripeteia). This example may seem silly, but the point is that peripeteia is not an archaic concept but an incredibly potent literary device that is used effectively in almost every genre at almost every level.

Anagnorisis is similarly ubiquitous. The discovery can be a simple matter of seeing clearly a pattern in events that had seemed obscure before, or it can be a moment of recognition that alters the character's behavior and sense of self. To draw two examples from the movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, we find a simpler kind of anagnorisis in Luke's discovery that the little green guy is Yoda and the more complex kind in Luke's discovery that he is Darth Vader's son.

The difference between these examples from popular culture and the best of Greek tragedy is the way in which peripeteia and anagnorisis are integrated into the plot of a tragedy. Aristotle insists that these elements not be included unless they are an inevitable part of the necessary or probable sequence of events that leads from beginning to end. The reversals in each episode of *The A-Team* are hardly necessitated by events; they usually seem forced and improbable. They are simply cheap devices to keep the audience guessing.



The unity of plot in Greek tragedy is meant to clarify a pattern in events that helps us to understand the consequences of our thoughts and actions. Peripeteia and anagnorisis essentially help us to recognize why these patterns are not immediately evident to anyone with a little life experience. Life is not a simple progress from A to B, but it involves reversals that upset our best laid plans. Further, we are far from aware of the many factors—both in ourselves and in the world around us—that determine our fate, and we often only learn of some important factor through a moment of belated recognition. A tragedy that includes peripeteia and anagnorisis allows us to see the inevitability of certain fates and also makes us understand why we are so often unable to perceive these fates.

Chapter 12 is an odd intrusion that interrupts Aristotle's discussion of plot. There is some question as to whether this chapter is in fact Aristotle's, or at least whether he intended it to be inserted into the discussion where it is. It seems oddly limiting in a way quite different from the discussion of the unity of plot. The call for a tightly structured plot may be applied to some extent to modern tragedy, but the requirement that there be a certain number of choral songs hardly seems to be a necessary element. Again, we should recall that Aristotle is primarily an observer and only sometimes a legislator. In discussing the quantitative parts of a tragedy, he may be simply remarking on what he has observed.

At the very least, this chapter helps us understand how the choral songs and speeches by actors are meant to frame one another. We have a spoken Prologue and Exode that frame all the choral songs and the Episodes that are inserted between choral songs. We might think of the choral songs as being like the refrain in a pop song, and the spoken bits as being like the verses. The spoken bits advance the action and deal with the particulars of the play, while the choral songs frame the action and discuss the overall themes of the play.

## **Chapters 13–14**

### **Summary**

Aristotle suggests that the best kinds of plot are complex plots that arouse fear and pity. He thus concludes that three kinds of plot should be avoided. First, we should avoid plots that show a good man going from happiness to misery, since such events seem more odious than fearful or pitiable. Second, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from misery to happiness, since this arouses neither pity nor fear and appeals to none of our emotions. Third, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from happiness to misery, since it will also not arouse the feelings of pity or fear. We feel pity for undeserved misfortune (and a bad man deserves his misfortune), and we feel fear if the person we pity is something like ourselves.



Aristotle concludes that the best kind of plot involves the misfortune of someone who is neither particularly good nor particularly bad and whose downfall does not result from some unpleasantness or vice, but rather from hamartia—an error in judgment. A good plot, then, consists of the following four elements: (1) It must focus around one single issue; (2) the hero must go from fortune to misfortune, rather than vice versa; (3) the misfortune must result from hamartia; and (4) the hero should be at least of intermediate worth, and if not, he must be better—never worse—than the average person. This explains why tragedies tend to focus around a few families (there are many tragedies about the families of Oedipus and Orestes among others): they must be upstanding families that suffer great misfortune from an error in judgment rather than a vice. Only second-rate plots that pander too much to public taste focus on a double issue where the good fare well and the bad fare poorly.

Pity and fear—which Aristotle calls the "pleasures" of tragedy—are better if they result from the plot itself rather than the spectacle. A story like that of Oedipus should be able to arouse pity and fear even if it is told without any acting at all. The poet who relies on spectacle is relying on outside help, whereas the poet who relies only on his own plot is fully responsible for his creation.

We feel pity most when friends or family harm one another, rather than when unpleasantness takes place between enemies or those who are indifferent to one another. The deed may be done knowingly—as when Medea kills her children—or unknowingly—as when Oedipus kills his father. A third alternative is that one character plans to kill another, but then discovers the family connection between them in time to refrain from the killing.

Thus, the deed can either be done or not done, and it can take place in either ignorance or knowledge. Aristotle suggests that the best kind of plot is of the third alternative, where anagnorisis allows a harmful deed to be avoided. The second best case is where the deed is done in ignorance. And the third best is the case where the deed is done with full knowledge. Worst is the case where there is full knowledge throughout, and the premeditated deed is only refrained from at the moment of action. This scenario is not tragic because of the absence of suffering, and it is odious besides. Still, Aristotle acknowledges that it has been used to good effect, as with the case of Haemon and Creon in *Antigone*.

### **Analysis**

The Greek word hamartia translates pretty directly as "error" or "shortcoming" without any necessary overtones of guilt or moral failure. Our modern conception of tragedy and the "tragic flaw" of the hero usually involves the



concept of hubris, or overweening pride, that leads to disaster. Macbeth, for instance, has the arrogance to think he can overstep the laws of God and state and ultimately pays dearly for this arrogance. Macbeth is a tragic hero with a clear tragic flaw: his downfall results from a moral failing and can be seen as divine retribution proportional to his guilt. But Macbeth also contains heavy Christian overtones that would of course be found nowhere in Greek tragedy. An understanding of Aristotle's concept of hamartia—and indeed an understanding of Greek tragedy in general—relies on an understanding of the ethics and cosmology of the ancient Greeks.

The ethics the modern Western world has inherited from Christianity is an ethics of obligation. In this system, there are certain moral laws, and we are obligated to obey them. A failure to obey these laws represents an unwillingness on our part. If we go against the moral law, we are guilty of breaking that law. This conception of guilt draws on an ethical system wherein morality is something that can be disobeyed or resisted.

Greek ethics are based more on the notion of virtue than obligation. The Greek conception of reality is closely tied up to the concepts of goodness and harmony. This idea is clearly expressed in Plato's theory of Forms: the real world is made up of perfect, unchanging Forms, and it is our duty to approximate this reality as best we can. Virtue, for the Greeks, is a matter of attaining our real nature and of finding our true form. Thus, moral failure is not a matter of guilty recalcitrance, but simply a matter of error, of shortcoming, or of being unable for whatever reason to attain our true nature.

Hamartia, then, represents the Greek, and not the Christian, conception of moral failure. Greek heroes are not bad people—Aristotle explicitly states that they cannot be bad people—but are simply good people who fall short in some important respect. Tragedy is less a matter of showing how bad people are punished for their crimes, and is more a matter of showing how ignorance and error can have disastrous effects. The action is tragic precisely because we are all ignorant to some degree, all flawed, and we may all suffer deeply for these errors. This is a cold, hard fact of nature, and not a matter of justice and retribution.

In these sections, Aristotle is much less of an observer and much more of a legislator. He is no longer simply stating how tragedies tend to play themselves out but is now putting forward arguments as to what makes the best tragic plot. He is explicitly asking how we can maximize the feelings of pity and fear, which he calls "tragic pleasure." That he should refer to our pity and fear as "pleasure" is further evidence that he does not mean the kind of pity and fear we might experience were the events real.



However, Aristotle does seem to treat this kind of pity and fear as the goal of a good tragedy, which would contradict the commentary on Chapter 6 (which suggested that tragedians aim at more than just emotional therapy). We can perhaps answer this conundrum by treating pity and fear as a necessary means to some other end. Surely, Aristotle does not think the value of tragedy lies simply in its emotional effect but thinks rather that it lies in what these emotional effects can in turn provoke within us. This ultimate end is naturally harder to articulate, but it has something to do with a greater sense of awareness—of our shortcomings, of our fate, and of our behavior, etc. Presumably, this added awareness helps us overcome our ignorance and other shortcomings; in short, tragedy can help us with our own hamartia.

The question Aristotle focuses on, however, is how fear and pity are most effectively aroused? He suggests that the tragic hero ought to be neither overwhelmingly good nor overwhelmingly bad, but rather intermediate, much like us. We should be able to see in the hero a better version of ourselves. Our pity and fear will be aroused by the realization that if a better person than us can be made to suffer for his or her shortcomings, then we, too, may suffer for ours.

We find a seeming inconsistency in Aristotle's commendation of the best kind of plot being that where disaster is narrowly averted by ignorance turning into knowledge. Aristotle also seems to suggest that tragedy must take the hero from fortune to misfortune. Perhaps by the moment of anagnorisis the hero has already suffered misfortune enough.

## **Chapter 15**

### **Summary**

Aristotle turns his attention toward the character of the tragic hero and lays out four requirements. First, the hero must be good. The character of the hero denotes the hero's moral purpose in the play, and a good character will have a good moral purpose. Second, the good qualities of the hero must be appropriate to the character. For instance, warlike qualities can be good, but they would be inappropriate in a woman. Third, the hero must be realistic. In other words, if he is drawn from myth, he should be a reasonable semblance of the character portrayed in myths. Fourth, the hero must be consistent (by which Aristotle means the hero must be written consistently, not that the hero must behave consistently). He accepts that some characters are inconsistent but that they should be written so as to be consistent in their inconsistency. Like the plot itself, the behavior of the characters should be seen as necessary or probable, in accordance with the internal logic of their personality. Thus, a character may behave inconsistently so long as we can perceive this inconsistency as stemming from a personality that is internally consistent.



From these requirements, Aristotle thinks it clear that the *lusis*, or denouement, should arise out of the plot and not depend upon stage artifice. Both the characters and the plot ought to follow a probable or necessary sequence, so that the *lusis* should be a part of this sequence. Improbable events, or the intervention of the gods, should be reserved for events outside the action of the play or events beyond human knowledge. The actual incidents themselves should not rely on miracles but on probability and necessity.

In order to reconcile the first requirement—that the hero be good—with the third requirement—that the hero be realistic—Aristotle recommends that the poet should keep all the distinctive characteristics of the person being portrayed but touch them up a little to make the hero appear better than he is. For instance, in the *Iliad*, Homer repeatedly describes Achilles' hot temper and yet makes him seem exceedingly good and heroic nonetheless.

### **Analysis**

In Chapter 6, Aristotle outlines the six different parts of tragedy, denoting character and thought as attributes of the agents in the tragedy. Roughly speaking, character denotes the moral aspects of an agent, while thought denotes the intellectual aspects. Thought is generally exhibited in speeches that enunciate general truths and the like. An agent's thoughts are, roughly, what he or she shares in common with everyone else and what can be expressed clearly and directly to other people. Character is what is unique to each individual agent. What people want, what their motives are, what they are willing to do to get what they want, why they want what they want—all of these fall within the realm of character.

We might clarify the distinction between thought and character by saying that thought can be expressed directly, whereas character must be inferred. Let us take as an example the famous "to be or not to be" speech in *Hamlet*. Hamlet is debating whether or not he should commit suicide, reasoning on the one hand that this life is full of pain and misery and death is a quick way out, but on the other hand that no one knows what happens after death and that perhaps death is even worse than life. Thought is expressed in Hamlet's reasoning: we can all understand his reasons, and we can then think for ourselves which reasons are good and which are bad. Character is more subtle and complicated. The thoughts Hamlet expresses are universally understood and recognizable, but the kind of character that Hamlet must have to enunciate these thoughts is far from clear. Why is Hamlet contemplating suicide? What makes him offer these reasons and express them in this way? Why does he find the reasons against suicide more compelling? What, ultimately, does he want to do? Understanding thoughts is a simple matter of interpretation; understanding character is an uncertain procedure that requires penetrating psychological insight. We might



say that the character of an agent is everything about the agent that cannot be put into words.

Given the difficulties of understanding character, Aristotle seems to treat it in a very uncomplicated way. The first and second requirements basically demand that the tragic hero be of good and appropriate character. That is, his motives, desires, ambitions, etc., ought to be admirable to some extent and well suited to his station in life. Beyond that, they must be true to what the audience already knows of the hero (the third requirement), and the hero's behavior must be consistent (the fourth requirement).

The demand that the characters be consistent is in many ways parallel to Aristotle's demand for the unity of plot. Every action in the plot should be causally connected to every other action. The tragedy, viewed as a whole, should have the internal consistency of a clock, so that we should see a near inevitability in the way things turned out. Similarly, an agent should behave in such a way that every decision, every action, can be read as a manifestation of a single, unified character. Characters, too, should have the regularity of a clock, so that, when viewed as a whole, there should be a seeming inevitability in every decision the hero makes, based on what we know of the hero's character.

Aristotle does not rule out entirely that a hero could behave inconsistently, but he demands that the play, seen as a whole, should make this inconsistency comprehensible. Though in one instance the hero may behave one way, and in another behave in a contradictory manner, this contradiction should be made clear by the larger context. Aristotle condemns plays where inconsistent or puzzling behavior is never clarified.

Aristotle's hero must be of high rank, relatively virtuous, true to life, and consistent. These requirements depend to some extent on a relatively transparent moral worldview and understanding of psychology. In a world where motives are unclear and there are layers of psychology to work through, it might be difficult to determine whether a character is ultimately "good," or what goodness consists of. Further, a character may seem inconsistent, or at least ambiguous, if the agent's motives don't float to the surface by the end of the play. Euripides in particular is known for writing plays full of moral and psychological ambiguity. Not surprisingly, Aristotle seems to prefer the much cleaner Sophocles to Euripides. In retrospect, though, this seems more a matter of taste than of irrefutable reasoning.



## **Unit 2:**

### **a) Neoclassical Criticism: Critical Essays**

#### **1. Dr. Samuel Johnson: Preface to Shakespeare**

Eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson ((1709-1784) is one of the most significant figures in English literature. His fame is due in part to a widely read biography of him, written by his friend James Boswell and published in 1791. Although probably best known for compiling his celebrated dictionary, Johnson was an extremely prolific writer who worked in a variety of fields and forms.

#### **Chief Critical Approaches of Dr. Johnson are:**

Johnson tried teaching and later organized a school in Lichfield. His educational ventures were not successful, however, although one of his students, David Garrick, later famous as an actor, became a lifelong friend.

Johnson, having given up teaching, went to London to try the literary life. Thus began a long period of hack writing for the Gentleman's Magazine.

He founded his own periodical, The Rambler, in which he published, between 1750 and 1752, a considerable number of eloquent, insightful essays on literature, criticism, and moral

Beginning in 1747, while busy with other kinds of writing and always burdened with poverty, Johnson was also at work on a major project—compiling a dictionary commissioned by a group of booksellers. After more than eight years in preparation, the Dictionary of the English Language appeared in 1755. This remarkable work contains about 40,000 entries elucidated by vivid, idiosyncratic, still-quoted definitions and by an extraordinary range of illustrative examples.

Johnson published another periodical, The Idler, between 1758 and 1760.

In 1764 he and the eminent English portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds founded the Literary Club; its membership included such luminaries as Garrick, the statesman Edmund Burke, the playwrights Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and a young Scottish lawyer, James Boswell.

Johnson's last major work, The Lives of the English Poets, was begun in 1778, when he was nearly 70 years old, and completed—in ten volumes—in 1781. The work is a distinctive blend of biography and literary criticism.

#### **Johnson's points to remember in Preface to Shakespeare**

Shakespeare's characters are a just representation of human nature as they deal with passions and principles which are common to humanity. They are also true to the age, sex, profession to which they belong and hence the speech of one



cannot be put in the mouth of another. His characters are not exaggerated. Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life.

Shakespeare's plays are a storehouse of practical wisdom and from them can be formulated a philosophy of life. Moreover, his plays represent the different passions and not love alone. In this, his plays mirror life.

Shakespeare's use of tragic comedy: Shakespeare has been much criticized for mixing tragedy and comedy, but Johnson defends him in this. Johnson says that in mixing tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare has been true to nature, because even in real life there is a mingling of good and evil, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles etc. this may be against the classical rules, but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Moreover, tragic-comedy being nearer to life combines within itself the pleasure and instruction of both tragedy and comedy.

Shakespeare's use of tragicomedy does not weaken the effect of a tragedy because it does not interrupt the progress of passions. In fact, Shakespeare knew that pleasure consisted in variety. Continued melancholy or grief is often not pleasing. Shakespeare had the power to move, whether to tears or laughter.

Shakespeare's comic genius: Johnson says that comedy came natural to Shakespeare. He seems to produce his comic scenes without much labour, and these scenes are durable and hence their popularity has not suffered with the passing of time. The language of his comic scenes is the language of real life which is neither gross nor over refined, and hence it has not grown obsolete.

Shakespeare writes tragedies with great appearance of toil and study, but there is always something wanting in his tragic scenes. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy instinct.

### **Johnson's defence of Shakespeare's use of unities:**

Shakespeare's histories are neither tragedy nor comedy and hence he is not required to follow classical rules of unities. The only unity he needs to maintain in his histories is the consistency and naturalness in his characters and this he does so faithfully. In his other works, he has well maintained the unity of action. His plots have the variety and complexity of nature, but have a beginning, middle and an end, and one event is logically connected with another, and the plot makes gradual advancement towards the denouement.

Shakespeare shows no regard for the unities of Time and place, and according to Johnson, these have troubled the poet more than it has pleased his audience. The observance of these unities is considered necessary to provide credibility to the drama. But, any fiction can never be real, and the audience knows this. If a spectator can imagine the stage to be Alexandria and the actors to be Antony and Cleopatra, he can surely imagine much more. Drama is a delusion, and delusion has no limits. Therefore, there is no absurdity in showing different actions in different places.



As regards the unity of Time, Shakespeare says that a drama imitates successive actions, and just as they may be represented at successive places, so also they may be represented at different period, separated by several days. The only condition is that the events must be connected with each other.

Johnson further says that drama moves us not because we think it is real, but because it makes us feel that the evils represented may happen to ourselves. Imitations produce pleasure or pain, not because they are mistaken for reality, but because they bring realities to mind. Therefore, unity of Action alone is sufficient, and the other two unities arise from false assumptions. Hence it is good that Shakespeare violates them.

### **Faults of Shakespeare:**

Shakespeare writes without moral purpose and is more careful to please than to instruct. There is no poetic justice in his plays. This fault cannot be excused by the barbarity of his age for justice is a virtue independent of time and place.

Next, his plots are loosely formed, and only a little attention would have improved them. He neglects opportunities of instruction that his plots offer, in fact, he very often neglects the later parts of his plays and so his catastrophes often seem forced and improbable.

There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his play.

His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his narration, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Narration in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose and too large for thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which engulf him in mire. For a pun, he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth. He often fails at moments of great excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

**Merits of Shakespeare:** He perfected the blank verse, imparted to it diversity and flexibility and brought it nearer to the language of prose.

Clearly bring out the critical value of the 'Preface to Shakespeare.' What are its main merits ? What is the place in the history of Shakespearean criticism ?

Dr. Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare is a classic of literary criticism. It displays all Johnson's gifts at their best—the lucidity, the virile energy, the individuality of his style; his sturdy commonsense and discernment; and his massive knowledge of the English language and literature. In his criticism of



Shakespeare he is above his usual political, personal, religious and literary prejudices.

His judgement here is impartial and objective. He mentions both the merits and faults of Shakespeare like a true critic. He is very honest and sincere in his estimate of Shakespeare. He is able to free himself from the shackles of classical dogma and tradition. In an age of classicism he dismisses the classical concepts of the unities of Time and Place. He tests Shakespeare by fact and experience, by the test of time, nature and universality. His defence of tragic-comedy is superb and still unsurpassed. He has excelled his guru Dryden. He finds Shakespeare great because he holds a mirror to nature. In minimizing the importance of love on the sum of life, Johnson anticipates Shaw.

His enumeration of faults in Shakespeare in itself is a classic piece of criticism. These faults he finds are owing to two causes—(a) carelessness, (b) excess of conceit. "The detailed analysis of the faults" says Raleigh, "is a fine piece of criticism, and has never been seriously challenged." Shakespeare's obscurities arise from

- a) the careless manner of publication;**
- b) the shifting fashions and grammatical licence of Elizabethan English;**
- c) the use of colloquial English,**
- d) the use of many allusions, references, etc., to topical events and personalities,**
- e) the rapid flow of ideas which often hurries him to a second thought before the first has been fully explained.**

Thus many of Shakespeare's obscurities belong either to the age or the necessities of stagecraft and not to the man. "In my opinion," concludes Johnson, "very few of his lines were difficult to his audience, and that he uses such expressions as were then common, though the paucity of contemporary writers makes them now seem peculiar.

The object of all criticism is to make the obscure and the confused clear and understood and it is this service which Johnson has performed to Shakespeare. "Johnson's strong grasp of the main thread of the discourse, his sound sense, and his wide knowledge of humanity, enables him, in a hundred passages, to go straight to Shakespeare's meanings." (Raleigh). Johnson led Shakespearean criticism back from paths that led to nowhere, and suggested directions in which discoveries might be made. He was the first to emphasize the historical and comparative point of view in criticism. He says in the Preface, "every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his own particular opportunities." It was he who, "stemmed the tide of rash emendation, and the ebb which began with him has continued ever since." With great shrewdness and acuteness, he states in the Preface that "they who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right than we who read it only in imagination." Therefore, the readings of the



earliest editions must be true, and should not be disturbed without sufficient reason.

In short, to quote John Bailey again, "Shakespeare has had subtler and more poetic art than Johnson; but no one has equalled the insight, sobriety, lucidity and finality which Johnson shows in his own field." Johnson's work on Shakespeare has not been superseded. He has been depreciated and neglected ever since the 19th century brought in the new aesthetic and philosophical criticism. The 20th century, it seems likely, will treat him more respectfully." (Raleigh).

"Johnson's Preface" writes E. E. Halliday, "is remarkable not so much for what it says as for what it is, the judicial summing up of the opinion of a century; it is the impartial estimate of Shakespeare's virtues and defects by a powerful mind anxious not to let his prejudices prevent the defects as he saw them from weighing too lightly in the balance. It is the final verdict of an epoch."

There are a few limitations of the Preface too. Johnson could not fathom the depths of Shakespeare's poetic genius. Nor could he think of the psychological subtleties of his characterization. He was equally deaf to "the overtones of Shakespeare's poetry at its most sublime. His criticism of Shakespeare's verbal quibbling shows the deficiency of his perceptive powers. The mystery of a Shakespearean tragedy was beyond the reach of his common sense. No wonder then if he feels that Shakespeare was at his best in comedy; 'In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve.' He could not see "how truth may be stated in myth or symbol, how *The Tempest* and *Winter's Tale*, for instance, are more than pleasant romantic pieces: significantly, he says-of the latter that 'with all its absurdities, it is very entertaining. The limitations of his critical sensibility are nowhere more prominent than in his complaint that Shakespeare "seems to write without any moral purpose." He" fails to see the hidden morals of Shakespeare's plays; to him only the explicitly stated morals are the only morals. Thus some of the most conspicuous virtues of Shakespeare, for example, his objectivity and his highly individualized treatment of his dramatic characters, are treated by Johnson as his "defect." These defects are certainly not Shakespeare's, but Johnson's.

But these shortcomings do not mar the basic merits of his Preface. His Preface is as immortal as the plays of Shakespeare. They demonstrate to the best his mature and profound sense of the human situation, his study and erudition. The tests of Shakespeare provided by him are valid even today.

## **Merits of Shakespeare**

### **(1) Representation of general nature:**

Shakespeare is, more than anyone else, a poet of nature. Through his works he reflects life.



**(2) His characters have a universal appeal:**

Shakespeare's characters do not belong to the society of a particular place or time; they are universal, representing every man. His characters have a universal appeal. They act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles which are experienced by all mankind.

**(3) Shakespeare's greatness does not rest upon individual passages:**

It is because of this universality in the portrayal of characters that Shakespeare's plays are full of "practical axioms and domestic wisdom".

**(4) The dialogue in his plays is based on the actual conversation of people:**

Shakespeare's dialogue is VERY realistic. His dialogue is pursued with much ease and simplicity. And it seems to have been taken from the common conversation of human beings.

**(5) Theme of love is not over-emphasized:**

In a majority of the dramas of other dramatists love is the universal agent that causes all good and evil and hastens or retards every action. Shakespeare never assigns any excessive role to this passion in his plays. He catches his clues from the world of day-to-day life and exhibits in his plays only what he finds in life.

**(6) Every character is distinctly individualized:**

Shakespeare's characters are universally delineated but it is easy to distinguish one from another.

**(7) A realistic and convincing portrayal of human nature:**

Shakespeare's characters are not exaggerated. He does not give us purely virtuous or utterly depraved characters. Even when the plot requires a supernatural agency, the tone of the dialogues of various characters is life-like and realistic.

**(8) Reflection of life:**

Shakespeare deserves praise because "his drama is the mirror of life". His characters express human sentiments in human language in situations derived from real life.

**(9) Objection of some critics is answered:**

Shakespeare's emphasis on general human nature has invited disapproval and hostility from some critics. Johnson answers that, in reality, Shakespeare assigns nature a prominent role and gives less room to the accidental features. He is careful of preserving adventitious distinctions. His story or plot may demand Romans or kings but what Shakespeare thinks about is the human element in them. The objection of the critics on this issue merely proves their petty-mindedness.

**(10) Mixture of tragic and comic elements is defended:**

Johnson agrees in the strictest sense that Shakespeare's plays are neither comedies nor tragedies. They are compositions of a distinct kind which show the real state of nature. Shakespeare's genius is proved in his power to give rise to joy and sorrow through the same play. Almost all his plays have serious as



well as absurd characters and thus sometimes cause seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.

**(11) Appeal from rules of criticism to the reality of life:**

Shakespeare's practice in mingling the comic and tragic elements in the same play is contrary to the rules of dramatic writing. But rules are not more important than the claims of realism:-

"There is always an appeal open from criticism to nature".

The object of literature is to give instruction by pleasing the reader.

**(12) The artificial classification of Shakespeare's plays:**

The division of Shakespeare's plays into comedies, tragedies and histories is not based on any exact or definite ideas of such labels. A comedy has generally been regarded as a play with a happy ending, no matter how distressing the incidents of the plot in general may be. A play is classified as a matter how light some of the scenes in the course of its plot may be. A historical play is believed to be one that depicts a series of actions in a chronological order. It is not always very exactly distinguished, from tragedy.

(13) Shakespeare's natural genius for comedy:

**Demerits of Shakespeare according to Dr. Samuel Johnson**

**(1) Virtue sacrificed to convenience:**

His first defect is that he sacrifices virtue to convenience. He carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong, and at the end dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance. This fault is serious because of the fact that it is always a writer's duty to make the world morally better.

**(2) Carelessness about plot development:**

Secondly, Shakespeare's plots are often very loosely formed and carelessly developed. He neglects opportunities of giving instruction or pleasure which the development of the plot provides to Shakespeare wrote his plays in accordance with his natural disposition. He did not know the "rules" of dramatic writing. Rymer correctly tells us that Shakespeare's natural disposition lay in the direction of comedy. In writing tragedy he had to toil hard. But his comic scenes seem to have been written spontaneously and with great success. Comedy was, indeed, congenial to his nature.

In many of his plays the latter part does not receive much of his attention.

**(3) Anachronism/ Violation of chronology:**

Thirdly, fault in Shakespeare's plays is anachronism — his violation of chronology. Shakespeare shows no regard to distinction of time or place. Thus we find Hector quoting Aristotle in 'Troilus and Cressida', and the love of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies in 'A Mid-Summer Night's Dream'.

(4) Coarseness of comic dialogues:



Fourthly, Shakespeare's plays also have faults of dialogue and diction. His comic scenes are seldom very successful when representing witty exchanges between characters.

**(5) Excessive labor produces undesired effects in the tragic plays:**

Fifthly, his tragic plays become worse in proportion to the labor he spends on them. Whenever he strains himself to produce effects, the result is tediousness, and obscurity.

**(6) Verbosity and prolixity of words:**

Sixthly, his narration shows an undue pomp of diction and unnecessary repetition. He uses more words than are necessary to describe an incident.

**(7) Flamboyant speeches and inflated vocabulary:**

Seventhly, the set speeches in some of his plays are dispiriting, cold and feeble. Sometimes the language is intricate even when the thought is not subtle, or the line is bulky though the image is not great. Sometimes trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas are expressed through high-sounding and inflated vocabulary.

**(8) Losing intensity to feebleness:**

Eighthly, what he does best, he soon ceases to do. Shakespeare cuts short his own highest excellence in arousing tragic feelings by the spectacle of the fall of a great man, or the misfortune of an innocent character, or a disappointment in love. The result is that the intense feelings aroused by him suddenly lose their intensity and become feeble.

**(9) Weakness for quibbles and craze for Puns:**

Lastly, Shakespeare could never resist a quibble. Whatever be the occasion of the dialogue, whether the situation is amusing or tense, Shakespeare seizes the opportunity of employing a pun.



## Unit 3:

### 2. Matthew Arnold: “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”

Matthew Arnold, a 19th-century English poet, critic, and cultural commentator, wrote "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in 1864. In this essay, Arnold reflects on the role of criticism in society, especially in a rapidly changing world. Here's a detailed note on key aspects of Arnold's essay:

#### Background:

##### 1. Author Background:

- Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) was a Victorian poet and critic associated with the mid-19th-century literary movement known as "New Criticism."
- He served as an inspector of schools, which influenced his views on education and culture.

##### 2. Historical Context:

- The essay was written during a period of significant social, political, and industrial changes in Victorian England.
- Arnold witnessed the challenges posed by rapid industrialization and the erosion of traditional values.

#### Central Themes:

##### 1. The Function of Criticism:

- Arnold argues that the primary function of criticism is to see the object as it really is rather than projecting one's own desires and prejudices onto it.
- Criticism should aim at a disinterested and objective evaluation of literature and culture.

##### 2. The Ideal Critic:

- Arnold introduces the concept of the "ideal critic" who possesses a disinterestedness and impartiality in judgment.
- The ideal critic should have a comprehensive understanding of literature, culture, and the prevailing intellectual and social conditions.

##### 3. Culture and Anarchy:

- Arnold explores the idea of "culture" as a harmonious development of the individual's intellectual and moral faculties.
- He contrasts "culture" with "anarchy," representing the chaos that arises when society lacks a unifying and uplifting intellectual influence.

##### 4. Critical Intelligence and the Creative Spirit:

- Arnold emphasizes the interdependence of critical intelligence and the creative spirit.
- Criticism should guide and refine the creative impulses of society, fostering a more enlightened and cultured community.

##### 5. Relation to Society:

- Arnold discusses the relationship between literature, criticism, and society.
- He argues that criticism should be responsive to the needs of society, helping it navigate the complexities of cultural change.

##### 6. Literature as a Conveyer of Ideas:

- Arnold sees literature as a powerful medium for conveying ideas and values.
- Criticism plays a crucial role in interpreting and elucidating these ideas for the benefit of society.



## Legacy and Influence:

- Arnold's essay has been influential in shaping discussions on the role of criticism in society.
- His emphasis on the pursuit of high culture and the role of the critic as a mediator between culture and society has resonated through subsequent generations.

## Criticisms:

- Some critics argue that Arnold's concept of "culture" may be elitist and exclusive, neglecting the diversity of cultural expressions.

Matthew Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" remains a significant work in the history of literary criticism, offering insights into the relationship between literature, criticism, and societal well-being during a time of significant societal transformation.

Introduction: Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the Victorian poet and critic, was 'the first modern critic' [1], and could be called 'the critic's critic', being a champion not only of great poetry, but of literary criticism itself. The purpose of literary criticism, in his view, was 'to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas', and he has influenced a whole school of critics including new critics such as T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Allen Tate. He was the founder of the sociological school of criticism, and through his touchstone method introduced scientific objectivity to critical evaluation by providing comparison and analysis as the two primary tools of criticism.

Arnold's evaluations of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are landmarks in descriptive criticism, and as a poet-critic he occupies an eminent position in the rich galaxy of poet-critics of English literature.

T. S. Eliot praised Arnold's objective approach to critical evaluation, particularly his tools of comparison and analysis, and Allen Tate in his essay *Tension in Poetry* imitates Arnold's touchstone method to discover 'tension', or the proper balance between connotation and denotation, in poetry. These new critics have come a long way from the Romantic approach to poetry, and this change in attitude could be attributed to Arnold, who comes midway between the two schools.

## The social role of poetry and criticism

To Arnold a critic is a social benefactor. In his view the creative artist, no matter how much of a genius, would cut a sorry figure without the critic to come to his aid. Before Arnold a literary critic cared only for the beauties and defects of works of art, but Arnold the critic chose to be the educator and guardian of public opinion and propagator of the best ideas.

Cultural and critical values seem to be synonymous for Arnold. Scott James, comparing him to Aristotle, says that where Aristotle analyses the work of art, Arnold analyses the role of the critic. The one gives us the principles which



govern the making of a poem, the other the principles by which the best poems should be selected and made known. Aristotle's critic owes allegiance to the artist, but Arnold's critic has a duty to society.

To Arnold poetry itself was the criticism of life: 'The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty', and in his seminal essay *The Study of Poetry* (1888) he says that poetry alone can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. He claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science, and religion. Religion attaches its emotion to supposed facts, and the supposed facts are failing it, but poetry attaches its emotion to ideas and ideas are infallible. And science, in his view is incomplete without poetry. He endorses Wordsworth's view that 'poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science', adding 'What is a countenance without its expression?' and calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge'.

### **A moralist**

As a critic Arnold is essentially a moralist, and has very definite ideas about what poetry should and should not be. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas, he says, is a poetry of revolt against life, and a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference to life.

Arnold even censored his own collection on moral grounds. He omitted the poem *Empedocles on Etna* from his volume of 1853, whereas he had included it in his collection of 1852. The reason he advances, in the Preface to his *Poems* of 1853 is not that the poem is too subjective, with its Hamlet-like introspection, or that it was a deviation from his classical ideals, but that the poem is too depressing in its subject matter, and would leave the reader hopeless and crushed. There is nothing in it in the way of hope or optimism, and such a poem could prove to be neither instructive nor of any delight to the reader.

Aristotle says that poetry is superior to History since it bears the stamp of high seriousness and truth. If truth and seriousness are wanting in the subject matter of a poem, so will the true poetic stamp of diction and movement be found wanting in its style and manner. Hence the two, the nobility of subject matter, and the superiority of style and manner, are proportional and cannot occur independently.

Arnold took up Aristotle's view, asserting that true greatness in poetry is given by the truth and seriousness of its subject matter, and by the high diction and movement in its style and manner, and although indebted to Joshua Reynolds for the expression 'grand style', Arnold gave it a new meaning when he used it in his lecture *On Translating Homer* (1861):

I think it will be found that that the grand style arises in poetry when a noble



nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with a severity a serious subject.

According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style, while Milton is the best model of severe grand style. Dante, however, is an example of both.

Even Chaucer, in Arnold's view, in spite of his virtues such as benignity, largeness, and spontaneity, lacks seriousness. Burns too lacks sufficient seriousness, because he was hypocritical in that while he adopted a moral stance in some of his poems, in his private life he flouted morality.

### **Return to Classical values**

Arnold believed that a modern writer should be aware that contemporary literature is built on the foundations of the past, and should contribute to the future by continuing a firm tradition. Quoting Goethe and Niebuhr in support of his view, he asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism, and therefore cannot provide noble characters such as those found in Classical literature.

He urged modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical literature, in his view, possess pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity, while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry, and don't possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry.

Arnold turns his back on the prevailing Romantic view of poetry and seeks to revive the Classical values of objectivity, urbanity, and architectonics. He denounces the Romantics for ignoring the Classical writers for the sake of novelty, and for their allusive (Arnold uses the word 'suggestive') writing which defies easy comprehension.

### **Preface to Poems of 1853**

In the preface to his Poems (1853) Arnold asserts the importance of architectonics; ('that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes') in poetry - the necessity of achieving unity by subordinating the parts to the whole, and the expression of ideas to the depiction of human action, and condemns poems which exist for the sake of single lines or passages, stray metaphors, images, and fancy expressions. Scattered images and happy turns of phrase, in his view, can only provide partial effects, and not contribute to unity. He also, continuing his anti-Romantic theme, urges, modern poets to shun allusiveness and not fall into the temptation of subjectivity.

He says that even the imitation of Shakespeare is risky for a young writer, who should imitate only his excellences, and avoid his attractive accessories, tricks of style, such as quibble, conceit, circumlocution and allusiveness, which will



lead him astray.

Arnold commends Shakespeare's use of great plots from the past. He had what Goethe called the architectonic quality, that is his expression was matched to the action (or the subject). But at the same time Arnold quotes Hallam to show that Shakespeare's style was complex even where the press of action demanded simplicity and directness, and hence his style could not be taken as a model by young writers. Elsewhere he says that Shakespeare's 'expression tends to become a little sensuous and simple, too much intellectualised'.

Shakespeare's excellences are 1) The architectonic quality of his style; the harmony between action and expression. 2) His reliance on the ancients for his themes. 3) Accurate construction of action. 4) His strong conception of action and accurate portrayal of his subject matter. 5) His intense feeling for the subjects he dramatises.

His attractive accessories (or tricks of style) which a young writer should handle carefully are 1) His fondness for quibble, fancy, conceit. 2) His excessive use of imagery. 3) Circumlocution, even where the press of action demands directness. 4) His lack of simplicity (according to Hallam and Guizot). 5) His allusiveness.

As an example of the danger of imitating Shakespeare he gives Keats's imitation of Shakespeare in his *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*. Keats uses felicitous phrases and single happy turns of phrase, yet the action is handled vaguely and so the poem does not have unity. By way of contrast, he says the Italian writer Boccaccio handled the same theme successfully in his *Decameron*, because he rightly subordinated expression to action. Hence Boccaccio's poem is a poetic success where Keats's is a failure.

Arnold also wants the modern writer to take models from the past because they depict human actions which touch on 'the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time'. Characters such as Agamemnon, Dido, Aeneas, Orestes, Merope, Alcmeon, and Clytemnestra, leave a permanent impression on our minds. Compare 'The Iliad' or 'The Aeneid' with 'The Childe Harold' or 'The Excursion' and you see the difference.

A modern writer might complain that ancient subjects pose problems with regard to ancient culture, customs, manners, dress and so on which are not familiar to contemporary readers. But Arnold is of the view that a writer should not concern himself with the externals, but with the 'inward man'. The inward man is the same irrespective of clime or time.



## **The Function of Criticism**

It is in his *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) that Arnold says that criticism should be a 'dissemination of ideas, a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world'. He says that when evaluating a work the aim is 'to see the object as in itself it really is'. Psychological, historical and sociological background are irrelevant, and to dwell on such aspects is mere dilettantism. This stance was very influential with later critics.

Arnold also believed that in his quest for the best a critic should not confine himself to the literature of his own country, but should draw substantially on foreign literature and ideas, because the propagation of ideas should be an objective endeavour.

## **The Study of Poetry**

In *The Study of Poetry*, (1888) which opens his *Essays in Criticism: Second series*, in support of his plea for nobility in poetry, Arnold recalls Sainte-Beuve's reply to Napoleon, when latter said that charlatanism is found in everything. Sainte-Beuve replied that charlatanism might be found everywhere else, but not in the field of poetry, because in poetry the distinction between sound and unsound, or only half-sound, truth and untruth, or only half-truth, between the excellent and the inferior, is of paramount importance.

For Arnold there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. To him poetry is the criticism of life, governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. It is in the criticism of life that the spirit of our race will find its stay and consolation. The extent to which the spirit of mankind finds its stay and consolation is proportional to the power of a poem's criticism of life, and the power of the criticism of life is in direct proportion to the extent to which the poem is genuine and free from charlatanism.

In *The Study of Poetry* he also cautions the critic that in forming a genuine and disinterested estimate of the poet under consideration he should not be influenced by historical or personal judgements, historical judgements being fallacious because we regard ancient poets with excessive veneration, and personal judgements being fallacious when we are biased towards a contemporary poet. If a poet is a 'dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best . . . enjoy his work'.



As examples of erroneous judgements he says that the 17th century court tragedies of the French were spoken of with exaggerated praise, until Pellisson reproached them for want of the true poetic stamp, and another critic, Charles d' Héricault, said that 17th century French poetry had received undue and undeserving veneration. Arnold says the critics seem to substitute 'a halo for physiognomy and a statue in the place where there was once a man. They give us a human personage no larger than God seated amidst his perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus.'

He also condemns the French critic Vitet, who had eloquent words of praise for the epic poem *Chanson de Roland* by Tuoldus, (which was sung by a jester, Taillefer, in William the Conqueror's army), saying that it was superior to Homer's *Iliad*. Arnold's view is that this poem can never be compared to Homer's work, and that we only have to compare the description of dying Roland to Helen's words about her wounded brothers Pollux and Castor and its inferiority will be clearly revealed.

### **The Study of Poetry: a shift in position - the touchstone method**

Arnold's criticism of Vitet above illustrates his 'touchstone method'; his theory that in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose.

From this we see that he has shifted his position from that expressed in the preface to his *Poems* of 1853. In *The Study of Poetry* he no longer uses the acid test of action and architectonics. He became an advocate of 'touchstones'. 'Short passages even single lines,' he said, 'will serve our turn quite sufficiently'.

Some of Arnold's touchstone passages are: Helen's words about her wounded brother, Zeus addressing the horses of Peleus, suppliant Achilles' words to Priam, and from Dante; Ugolino's brave words, and Beatrice's loving words to Virgil.

From non-Classical writers he selects from *Henry IV* Part II (III, i), Henry's expostulation with sleep - 'Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast . . . '. From *Hamlet* (V, ii) 'Absent thee from felicity awhile . . . '. From Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book 1, 'Care sat on his faded cheek . . . ', and 'What is else not to be overcome . . . '



## **The Study of Poetry: on Chaucer**

The French Romance poetry of the 13th century *langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl* was extremely popular in Europe and Italy, but soon lost its popularity and now it is important only in terms of historical study. But Chaucer, who was nourished by the romance poetry of the French, and influenced by the Italian Royal rhyme stanza, still holds enduring fascination. There is an excellence of style and subject in his poetry, which is the quality the French poetry lacks. Dryden says of Chaucer's Prologue 'Here is God's plenty!' and that 'he is a perpetual fountain of good sense'. There is largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity in Chaucer's writings. 'He is the well of English undefiled'. He has divine fluidity of movement, divine liquidness of diction. He has created an epoch and founded a tradition.

Some say that the fluidity of Chaucer's verse is due to licence in the use of the language, a liberty which Burns enjoyed much later. But Arnold says that the excellence of Chaucer's poetry is due to his sheer poetic talent. This liberty in the use of language was enjoyed by many poets, but we do not find the same kind of fluidity in others. Only in Shakespeare and Keats do we find the same kind of fluidity, though they wrote without the same liberty in the use of language.

Arnold praises Chaucer's excellent style and manner, but says that Chaucer cannot be called a classic since, unlike Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare, his poetry does not have the high poetic seriousness which Aristotle regards as a mark of its superiority over the other arts.

## **The Study of Poetry: on the age of Dryden and Pope**

The age of Dryden is regarded as superior to that of the others for 'sweetness of poetry'. Arnold asks whether Dryden and Pope, poets of great merit, are truly the poetical classics of the 18th century. He says Dryden's post-script to the readers in his translation of *The Aeneid* reveals the fact that in prose writing he is even better than Milton and Chapman.

Just as the laxity in religious matters during the Restoration period was a direct outcome of the strict discipline of the Puritans, in the same way in order to control the dangerous sway of imagination found in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, to counteract 'the dangerous prevalence of imagination', the poets of the 18th century introduced certain regulations. The restrictions that were imposed on the poets were uniformity, regularity, precision, and balance. These restrictions curbed the growth of poetry, and encouraged the growth of prose.



Hence we can regard Dryden as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid high priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century. Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the 'prose classics' of the 18th century.

As for poetry, he considers Gray to be the only classic of the 18th century. Gray constantly studied and enjoyed Greek poetry and thus inherited their poetic point of view and their application of poetry to life. But he is the 'scantiest, frailest classic' since his output was small.

### **The Study of Poetry: on Burns**

Although Burns lived close to the 19th century his poetry breathes the spirit of 18th Century life. Burns is most at home in his native language. His poems deal with Scottish dress, Scottish manner, and Scottish religion. This Scottish world is not a beautiful one, and it is an advantage if a poet deals with a beautiful world. But Burns shines whenever he triumphs over his sordid, repulsive and dull world with his poetry.

Perhaps we find the true Burns only in his bacchanalian poetry, though occasionally his bacchanalian attitude was affected. For example in his Holy Fair, the lines 'Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair/ Than either school or college', may represent the bacchanalian attitude, but they are not truly bacchanalian in spirit. There is something insincere about it, smacking of bravado.

When Burns moralises in some of his poems it also sounds insincere, coming from a man who disregarded morality in actual life. And sometimes his pathos is intolerable, as in Auld Lang Syne.

We see the real Burns (wherein he is unsurpassable) in lines such as, 'To make a happy fire-side clime/ to weans and wife/ That's the true pathos and sublime/ Of human life' (Ae Fond Kiss). Here we see the genius of Burns.

But, like Chaucer, Burns lacks high poetic seriousness, though his poems have poetic truth in diction and movement. Sometimes his poems are profound and heart-rending, such as in the lines, 'Had we never loved sae kindly/ had we never loved sae blindly/ never met or never parted/ we had ne'er been broken-hearted'.

Also like Chaucer, Burns possesses largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity. But instead of Chaucer's fluidity, we find in Burns a springing



bounding energy. Chaucer's benignity deepens in Burns into a sense of sympathy for both human as well as non-human things, but Chaucer's world is richer and fairer than that of Burns.

Sometimes Burns's poetic genius is unmatched by anyone. He is even better than Goethe at times and he is unrivalled by anyone except Shakespeare. He has written excellent poems such as Tam O'Shanter, Whistle and I'll come to you my Lad, and Auld Lang Syne.

When we compare Shelley's 'Pinnacled dim in the of intense inane' (Prometheus Unbound III, iv) with Burns's, 'They flatter, she says, to deceive me' (Tam Glen), the latter is salutary.

### **Arnold on Shakespeare**

Praising Shakespeare, Arnold says 'In England there needs a miracle of genius like Shakespeare's to produce a balance of mind'. This is not bardolatory, but praise tempered by a critical sense. In a letter he writes. 'I keep saying Shakespeare, you are as obscure as life is'.

In his sonnet On Shakespeare he says; 'Others abide our question. Thou are free./ We ask and ask - Thou smilest and art still,/ Out-topping knowledge'.

### **Arnold's limitations**

For all his championing of disinterestedness, Arnold was unable to practise disinterestedness in all his essays. In his essay on Shelley particularly he displayed a lamentable lack of disinterestedness. Shelley's moral views were too much for the Victorian Arnold. In his essay on Keats too Arnold failed to be disinterested. The sentimental letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne were too much for him.

Arnold sometimes became a satirist, and as a satirical critic saw things too quickly, too summarily. In spite of their charm, the essays are characterised by egotism and, as Tilotson says, 'the attention is directed, not on his object but on himself and his objects together'.

Arnold makes clear his disapproval of the vagaries of some of the Romantic poets. Perhaps he would have agreed with Goethe, who saw Romanticism as disease and Classicism as health. But Arnold occasionally looked at things with jaundiced eyes, and he overlooked the positive features of Romanticism which posterity will not willingly let die, such as its humanitarianism, love of nature,



love of childhood, a sense of mysticism, faith in man with all his imperfections, and faith in man's unconquerable mind.

Arnold's inordinate love of classicism made him blind to the beauty of lyricism. He ignored the importance of lyrical poems, which are subjective and which express the sentiments and the personality of the poet. Judged by Arnold's standards, a large number of poets both ancient and modern are dismissed because they sang with 'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art'.

It was also unfair of Arnold to compare the classical works in which figure the classical quartet, namely Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido with Heamann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, and 'The Excursion'. Even the strongest advocates of Arnold would agree that it is not always profitable for poets to draw upon the past. Literature expresses the zeitgeist, the spirit of the contemporary age. Writers must choose subjects from the world of their own experience. What is ancient Greece to many of us? Historians and archaeologists are familiar with it, but the common readers delight justifiably in modern themes. To be in the company of Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido is not always a pleasant experience. What a reader wants is variety, which classical mythology with all its tradition and richness cannot provide. An excessive fondness for Greek and Latin classics produces a literary diet without variety, while modern poetry and drama have branched out in innumerable directions.

As we have seen, as a classicist Arnold upheld the supreme importance of the architectonic faculty, then later shifted his ground. In the lectures On Translating Homer, On the Study of Celtic Literature, and The Study of Poetry, he himself tested the greatness of poetry by single lines. Arnold the classicist presumably realised towards the end of his life that classicism was not the last word in literature.

Arnold's lack of historic sense was another major failing. While he spoke authoritatively on his own century, he was sometimes groping in the dark in his assessment of earlier centuries. He used to speak at times as if ex cathedra, and this pontifical solemnity vitiated his criticism.

As we have seen, later critics praise Arnold, but it is only a qualified praise. Oliver Elton calls him a 'bad great critic'. T. S. Eliot said that Arnold is a 'Propagandist and not a creator of ideas'. According to Walter Raleigh, Arnold's method is like that of a man who took a brick to the market to give the buyers an impression of the building.

### **Arnold's legacy**

In spite of his faults, Arnold's position as an eminent critic is secure. Douglas Bush says that the breadth and depth of Arnold's influence cannot be measured or even guessed at because, from his own time onward, so much of his thought and outlook became part of the general educated consciousness. He



was one of those critics who, as Eliot said, arrive from time to time to set the literary house in order. Eliot named Dryden, Johnson and Arnold as some of the greatest critics of the English language.

Arnold united active independent insight with the authority of the humanistic tradition. He carried on, in his more sophisticated way, the Renaissance humanistic faith in good letters as the teachers of wisdom, and in the virtue of great literature, and above all, great poetry. He saw poetry as a supremely illuminating, animating, and fortifying aid in the difficult endeavour to become or remain fully human.

Arnold's method of criticism is comparative. Steeped in classical poetry, and thoroughly acquainted with continental literature, he compares English literature to French and German literature, adopting the disinterested approach he had learned from Sainte-Beuve.

Arnold's objective approach to criticism and his view that historical and biographical study are unnecessary was very influential on the new criticism. His emphasis on the importance of tradition also influenced F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.

Eliot is also indebted to Arnold for his classicism, and for his objective approach which paved the way for Eliot to say that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality, because it is not an expression of emotions but an escape from emotions.

Although Arnold disapproved of the Romantics' approach to poetry, their propensity for allusiveness and symbolism, he also shows his appreciation the Romantics in his *Essays in Criticism*. He praises Wordsworth thus: 'Nature herself took the pen out of his hand and wrote with a bare, sheer penetrating power'. Arnold also valued poetry for its strong ideas, which he found to be the chief merit of Wordsworth's poetry. About Shelley he says that Shelley is 'A beautiful but ineffectual angel beating in a void his luminous wings in vain'.

In an age when cheap literature caters to the taste of the common man, one might fear that the classics will fade into insignificance. But Arnold is sure that the currency and the supremacy of the classics will be preserved in the modern age, not because of conscious effort on the part of the readers, but because of the human instinct of self-preservation.

In the present day with the literary tradition over-burdened with imagery, myth, symbol and abstract jargon, it is refreshing to come back to Arnold and his like to encounter central questions about literature and life as they are perceived by a mature and civilised mind.



## **Unit 4:**

### **a) New Criticism: Critical Essays**

#### **1. Allen Tate – “Tension in Poetry”**

Allen Tate (1899-1979)

The new criticism which was a school of criticism flourished during the first half of the twentieth century in America and England. It put the theory of inspiration off the gear. It assumes a close and causative relationship between society and literature and between society and the writer. It is the stress on textual criticism which has made it new. Otherwise there is nothing new in it. It had its origin in the writings of T. E. Hulme; but it is now mainly an American movement. The term was first used by J. E. Spingarn. Its chief exponents in America are Kenneth Burke, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Richard Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, etc. In England its leading representatives are I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, etc.

It was the reaction against the external school of criticism which focuses on sociological, historical and biographical aspects of a text. It is an internal school of criticism. Different New critics of poetry answered differently in response to the question...

“What is poetic in poetry?”

To the new critics poetic poetry is

“its ability to attract attention towards itself.”

About this ability, R. S. Crane aptly remarks,

“From I. A. Richards’ concept of ‘behavior of words’.. or Allen Tate’s theory of tension’, we find the same search for the meaning of words. “

#### **Allen Tate as a critic:-**

John Oley Allen Tate is an American poet, essayist and social commentator. the Poet Laureate Consultant in poetry in 1943-44. Tate is certainly more comprehensive than J. C. Ransom. However both belongs to the group of American critic. John Paul says..

“Allen Tate’s prominence among the New Critics sets him in a position next Ransom.”



## **Two Types of Meaning :-**

Allen Tate states that every age has used different approaches to examine different works. According to him every age uses language differently. This he shows with example from different poem. He says that in most of the poems, we find two kinds of language.

### **1. Denotative (surface meaning) and (2) Connotative (hidden)**

The first one refers to 'logical or superficial meaning of the poem'. The second one means 'implied or metaphorical meaning of the poem.' Many criticism emphasized on denotative aspect of the poem, while some concentrated only on connotative meaning of the poem. According to Tate.

"Only that poetry is good poetry which communicates both the aspect, connotative and denotative.

"Tension in Poetry' An Essay of Great Worth"

In this essay, Tate is concerned with the question. "

How can the quality of a poem be determined"

He believes that it can be determined by the effect resulting from its meaning. To examine the way in which the poem attains its total meaning, he takes two words from logic. These words are 'intension' and 'extension'. He removes the prefix and says that the poetry attains its totality in 'Tension'. A poem therefore has both a literal meaning and also metaphorical meaning. Extension is denotative. Therefore it is the literal meaning. On the other hand, intension' is connotative. Therefore it is the metaphorical meaning of a poem. A good poem is one where both of these exist together Tate says,

"Good poetry is unity of all the meaning from the extremes of intension and extension.

Thus combination of intension and extension result in tension. Thus the presence of tension is the touchstone of good poetry for Tate. He explains the term 'tension' as follows that Tension is the core of the poetry. It can be called the entrance through which multiple meanings can be attained. He uses the term



‘tension’ never intend the ‘psychological tension’ he classifies that I am using the term not as general metaphor but as special one derived from dropping. He prefix of the logic term extension and intension.

## Literary Criticism “Tension in poetry” ()

### Allen Tate (1899-1979)

Introduction :-The rise of New Criticism:-

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Thus combination of intension and extension result in tension. Thus the presence of tension is the touchstone of good poetry for Tate. He explains the term 'tension' as follow that Tension is the core of the poetry. It can be called the entrance through which multiple meanings can be attained. He by the term 'tension' never intend the 'psychological tension' he classifies that I am using the term not as general metaphor but as special one derived from lopping. He prefix of the logic term extension and intension.

### ❖ Some Examples given by him.

In order to explain the importance of the presence of both the denotative and connotative aspects in a poem, he gives the examples of some poems. These poems are either deficient in the denotative aspect or a failure in the connotation. Therefore, they do not qualify to be ranked as good poems. Afterwards, he presents the example of his poetic touchstone in which we find the presence of 'tension'.

### ❖ Illustration of Fault Denotation:

Tate give the example of a 19<sup>th</sup> century lyric 'The Vine' by Jame Thomson (1834=1822)..

"The wine of Love is music,

And the feast of Love is song;

And when Love sits down to the banquet,

Love sits long...

The great rich Vine."

These line have no logical meaning. This poem is therefore, a failure in denotation.

### ❖ Illustration of Fault connotation:-

Then he gives an example of Abraham Cowley's (1618-1667) "Hymn – To Light". This poem is a success as far as denotative aspect is concerned but it is a failure in connotation.

First born of Chaos, who so far didst come

From the old Negro's darksome womb!

At last must flow."

These line lack in connotative intensity. Therefore a good poem is the one in which both the denotative and connotative aspects are present. M.H. Abram says that it seems as if "Tate means that a good poem incorporates both the abstract and the concrete, the general idea and the particular image in an integral whole."

### ❖ Illustration of Touchstone'

Tate gives an example of his poetic 'touchstone' in which we find present such tension. In the third part of his essay, Tate gives a target from 'Durante Alighieri (1265-1321) 'Inferno' as an instance of tension. Paolo and Francesca were lovers. They can not meet each other due to circumstance. The poet asks Francesca,

"From which place do you come."

She answer in three lines,

"Sitteth the city, wherein I was born

Upon the sea-shore where the Po descends

To rest in peace with all his retinue"

Here the literal meaning of these lines is that she was born in a town that is on the bank of the Sea-shore, where the river 'Po' falls along with the other rivers. But the metaphorical meaning is more than just this description of the place. When Francesca fuses herself with the river Po, there is mingling of extension and intension. The streams could be the desires of love for Paolo. When ever she goes her desire follow her. Here we have hidden means also. that is river attains peace that originates out of communion, but she is not able to meet her lover. Thus both the intension and extension become one and create 'tension'.

### ❖ Conclusion:-

In this way, Tate has made a significant contribution to the world of literary criticism. He has found out the new way of achieving full and perfect meaning from a poem. Estimating Allen Tate's criticism essay, Eva Thomas states, "Allen Tate is the critic, who really had gone to reality and significance of their highest type of the poetry that is created by the symbolic imagination."

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